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When Does National Identity Matter? Two Contrasting Symbolic Meaning of Brands in Emerging Countries

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This research focuses on national identity and addresses the ambiguity between the protection of embraced ideology and the pursuit of social development. Examining through experiments, it was founded that the congruity of brand personality with people's beliefs held for their nation, either actual or ideal, impacts on brand favorability.

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pilot study, we found no main effect of SK on any of our memory measures. However, the analysis of the interaction between self-esteem and SK manipulation revealed insightful results. Converging patterns were found for each of our four measures of memory for low SE consumers: an increase (decrease) of SK was associated with higher (lower) scores on recall, recognition, and discrimination tasks and with higher number of unanswered items. The opposite pattern of results was found for high SE consumers.

The next steps of this research involve experiments identifying possible extensions of our findings. The first area we investigate is the possible mediating effect of state (vs. trait) self-esteem on the relation between subjective knowledge change and information processing. A key challenge is to overcome a potential demand effect induced by a repeated explicit measure of self-esteem. To do so, a study-in-progress measures self-esteem using the IAT procedure (Greenwald 1995; Greenwald and Farnham 2000) right after the SK manipulation. In addition, we measure General Self-Efficacy to test whether other personality traits might moderate the relationship between SK change and memory for information. We also test whether our SK manipulation, in addition to memory for information, also impacts attitude change and normative quality of decision-making.

The present research promises important insights for our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between SK manipulation and information processing strategies. Our research may also have important applied implications as the findings will likely prove useful in improving information retention in public policy and health-related communications.

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When Does National Identity Matter? Two Contrasting Symbolic Meaning of Brands in Emerging Countries

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Extended Abstract

Under increasing globalization, cultural convergence occurs and people are exposed to multiple cultures simultaneously. Living in such a multiplex atmosphere, people risk an identity crisis in every aspect of their lives, even during consumption. One of the most

salient incongruence lies between identities and brand perceptions. This has merited much attention in marketing literature. For example, a research stream on nationalism and patriotism highlighted some potential hazardous outcomes, like anti-consumption movement (Varman & Belk, 2009) and repulsion to foreign brands (Wang and Wang, 2007), are resulted from the infringement of nationhood or ethnic identity. However, some research suggested “foreignness” is not essentially bad. For many occasions, global appeal is more valued by consumers due to its connotation of cosmopolitanism, modernity and high quality (Zhou & Belk, 2004; Steenkamp, Batra & Alden, 2001). Dong & Tian (2009) even suggested consumers might use foreign brands to assert a desired national identity.

Apparently, there exists the ambiguity in consumer choice between the protection of embraced ideology and the pursuit of social development. In light of this, this research investigated how this would impact on brand perceptions, especially in the emerging countries like China. More specifically, it was suggested that the congruity of brand personality with people’s beliefs held for their nation (i.e. national identity), either actual or ideal, impacts on brand favorability.

Based on self-concept theories (Levy, 1959; Rogers, 1951; Sirgy, 1986), consumers purchase and use goods that have a user image consistent with their own self-image in order to express and communicate their “self”. This process is known as self-congruity (or “self-image congruence”), which is driven by the two twin motives, the self-esteem motive (the tendency to seek experiences that enhances self-concepts) and the self-consistency motive (the tendency for an individual to behave consistently with her view of herself) (Malhotra, 1981, 1988; Sirgy, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c). This research tried to tease out their effects on different dimensions of a “self”, i.e. actual (referring to how a person perceive herself) and ideal (refers to how a person would like to perceive herself) (Rogers, 1951). It is suggested the relatively more salient the actual self (vs. ideal self) strives the decision making process, the stronger impact the self-esteem motive (vs. self-enhancement motive) exerts.

To operationalize the self-congruity conditions, an important pair of ideology related to national identity (i.e. traditionalism and modernism) was identified. In the research, “Traditional” referred to the values of respecting the past, customs and conventions, and venerating the quality of being historical, time-honored and legendary; whereas “Modern” represented a notion of being new, contemporary, up-to-date, and ahead of times (Pollay, 1983; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). While many traditional values might have been deeply rooted in consumers’ mind over decades, the influence of modern values has been intensifying and challenging the status quo of the existing ideology in commercial world. The trade-off among them perfectly illustrates the conflicts between the actual self (i.e. what the Chinese believe they are) and the ideal self (i.e. what they desire to become).

On the other hand, recognized as an important symbolic brand attribute through which consumers are enabled to express different dimensions of the self, such as the personal-self (Belk, 1988), the ideal self (Malhotra, 1988) and etc., brand personality is another important variable considered in the research. Two personalities, sincerity and excitement, are selected from the Big-five brand personality model (Aaker, 1997), in regarded to their robustness across cultures (Aaker, 2004) and prominence in variance explanation (Aaker, 1997). Embedding a pursuit of harmony, true sentiment and collective goals, sincere traits are found consistently across the East countries (e.g. Sung and Tinkham, 2005; Aaker, Benet-Martinez & Garolera, 2001; Huang and Lu, 2003). Alternatively, excitement connotes imaginativeness, innovativeness, independence and youthfulness (Aaker, 1997), which are not prevalent and accepted in these traditional societies. Consequently, congruence occurs when sincerity (vs. excitement) matches with traditionalism (vs. modernism) whereas incongruence occurs when reversing the match. In this sense, self-congruity was operationalized in a 2 (brand personality: sincerity vs. excitement) x 2 (national identity: traditional vs. modern) between-subject design and four conditions (i.e. actual/ideal vs. congruent/incongruent) were resulted.

To examine the hypotheses, several experiments would be conducted. Experiment 1 investigated the dynamics of congruity effect. Participants were given one version of the four manipulated advertisements and asked to rate “how much they like about the brand captured in the ads”, and “how much they identify with traditional (vs. modern) national images”. Results revealed that there exists a crossover interaction effect between brand personality and national identity, consistent with our predictions. It was found that consumers who possess stronger traditional (vs. modern) values prefer brands with coherent brand personalities, i.e. sincerity (vs. excitement). Surprisingly, for sincere brands, brand favorability does not differ significantly among the two country image perceptions; whereas there is significant difference among the two incongruent conditions (i.e. sincere/modern vs. exciting/traditional). This implied a prominent persistence of long-lasting cultural values regardless of social transforms and changes, offering insights unique to the transitioning national state. Meanwhile, the result obtained was encouraging. However, stronger evidence and support were sought to confirm the effect of the two motives and rule out other confining factors. Therefore, additional experiments were designing and would be conducted in parallel to Experiment 1.

In sum, this research enriched the understandings about the dynamics of consumer preferences in transforming economy and brought about both valuable theoretical and managerial implications. Particularly, this research applied self congruity theory to a “collective” self-belief about a nation (i.e. national identity). It also extended some interpretative researches on western brand meaning (e.g. Dong & Tian, 2009; Zhou & Belk, 2004; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). Through conducting experiments, it was illustrated empirically in what circumstances consumers prefer brands reflecting their desired national identity rather than the one reflecting a consistent identity. Moreover, it supplemented the existing self-concept theory (Levy, 1959; Roger, 1951; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1982) and offered additional insights to the conflicting congruity/incongruity situations. Most importantly, some valuable insights of understanding a transitioning economy are provided, consolidating the foundation for future research.

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Mortality Salience and Foreign Product Evaluation: An Important Moderator

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Motivation and Conceptualization

Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al., 1997) assumes that thoughts of death create anxiety, and that people have developed worldviews as a buffer against this anxiety. In 2004, Arndt et al. suggested that much can be learned regarding the relationship between terror management and consumer behavior. Indeed, at least two studies have shown consumers' tendency to prefer domestic products (over foreign products) is magnified under conditions of MS. In one study, for example, Jonas et al. (2005) found Germans in an MS condition showed more support for the German Mark and less support for the Euro. In another related study, Friese and Hofmann (2008) found Swiss consumers in an MS condition showed a stronger preference for Swiss Chocolate over other foreign options. While these studies support the basic propositions of TMT, previous research leaves at least two interesting questions unanswered. First, past research has focused on a somewhat narrow band of products (foreign currency and chocolates). Accordingly, it is relevant to ask whether similar findings will emerge based on more common products such as cameras or MP3 players. Second, past research has not, to our knowledge, examined whether the impact of MS on foreign product evaluation depends on theoretically-meaningful individual differences.

According to TMT, MS enhances the impact of people's worldviews on judgments of in-groups (e.g., domestic products) and out-groups (e.g., foreign products). One relevant individual difference in this regard is consumer ethnocentrism (CE), which Shimp and Sharma (1987) define as "the belief among consumers that it is inappropriate, or even immoral, to purchase foreign products because to do so is damaging to the domestic economy, costs domestic jobs and is unpatriotic" (p. 281). In theory, the impact of MS on foreign product evaluation should be stronger among consumers high in CE. The present study tests that hypothesis by asking consumers to evaluate products produced in the U.S. and Iran. Prior to evaluating the products, consumers complete the CE scale and write down their thoughts about death or dental pain (a commonly used control condition in TMT research).

Overall, we expected that consumers would prefer products made in the U.S. to products made in Iran (i.e., a main effect of country of production; *Hypothesis 1*). We also expected this tendency to be stronger among those high in CE (i.e., a two-way interaction between country of production and CE; *Hypothesis 2*). Finally, we anticipated that the tendency to prefer U.S. products would be the strongest among consumers high in CE who were assigned to the MS condition (i.e., a three-way interaction between CE, country of production and MS condition; *Hypothesis 3*). We chose to compare products made in the U.S. to products made in Iran because prior research has suggested that it is important to look at the impact of MS on foreign product evaluation using a country which is considered antagonistic